

# Al's Story: Overcoming Beliefs That Inhibit Learning

Janice Henson  
Carol Gilles

*A teacher shares her minute-by-minute decisions in working with an alienated student whose beliefs about reading created a wall of resistance to learning.*

259

Al's Story



*his name. After communicating in this way, Al was ready to talk about what happened at school that day. He'd gotten in trouble again. Yet again school was a dismal place for Al and a place where he was defined as bad.*

When a student labels school as “bad” and home as “good,” we have a troubled child caught up in a troubling circumstance. Since Al is labeled learning disabled in reading, we might immediately conclude that Al needs a more appropriate reading program. But he needs this and much more. Besides Al's reading difficulties, there is a less visible but more threatening problem. He is entwined in a complicated situation that involves his view of himself as a learner, the mismatch between his culture and that of the school, and his lack of trust in the school personnel and the learning process itself.

Often when teachers encounter students like Al, they are stymied. Janice, a special education teacher, collaborated with Carol, a university reading professor, to figure out how best to help Al. Both teachers came from unique perspectives. By collaborating, they were able to use their own lenses to interrogate their insights about Al.

Teachers who work with struggling readers know that factors leading to

*Al entered the room slowly, head down, arms hanging loosely at his sides. Normally this fifth grader exploded, full of words and undisciplined energy, into any space. I was afraid a loved one of his had died. He stopped a few steps into the room with his eyes still glued to the floor. I persuaded him to sit in a chair. Still he would not look up, would not*

*speak. “What could it possibly be?” I wondered. Despite my best efforts, he did not say anything for an entire hour. Finally, he took a piece of paper and drew two buildings side-by-side. One building he labeled school, and the other he labeled home. Under the school he wrote “bad” and under the home he wrote “good.” Above both figures he wrote*

school success are complex (Bempechat & Drago-Severson, 1999). What many struggling readers believe about schooling gets in the way of instruction (Block, 2000; Cairney, 2000; Driscoll, 2000; Hall, Prevatte & Cunningham, 1995; Lysaker, 2000; McCallister, 2000; Hynes, 2000; Merrill, 2000). All learners have constructs that represent their own ways of understanding the world (Kelly, 1963), including what they take to be true about schooling. These constructs develop in learners as they interact with teachers and peers in multiple, overlapping learning communities, each of which views the world in a particular way (Eisenhart, 2001). Unfortunately, most reading assessment and remediation activities ignore student beliefs about themselves as learners (Block, 2000). If we want students to be successful, we must “pay particular attention to personal construction of culture and context” instead of ignoring student beliefs (Bempechat & Drago-Severson, 1999, p. 306). For Al, that means we must pay as much attention to what he believes about himself as a learner as we do to any proposed improvement plan.

In addition to students’ concepts of themselves, risk taking is another important factor in school success. People who take educational risks generally learn more easily than those who don’t (Dweck & Bempechet, 1983). It is normal for students who find risk overly uncomfortable to avoid it, making success unlikely. The circle of failure begins: lack of success increases the risk, which leads to even greater discomfort in subsequent learning situations, which leads to even further withdrawal. If this cycle is not broken, beliefs that inhibit learning will grow (Hynes, 2000). Students with inhibiting be-

liefs opt out of learning opportunities by removing themselves or sabotaging instruction (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). They avoid learning situations because they do not trust themselves as learners. Instead, they believe: 1) learning difficulties result from cognitive and physical disabilities that are unchangeable and out of their control; and 2) learning should be effortless, so mistakes indicate failure and lack of ability (Dweck & Bempechet, 1983).

Distrust of educational institutions also inhibits learning. After years of failure, many students develop a wall of resistance that gets in the way of instruction. Schools are “neither politically nor culturally neutral sites” (Quiocho & Rios,

**After years of failure,  
many students develop  
a wall of resistance  
that gets in the  
way of instruction.**

2000). Because schools typically reflect the dominant culture, many minority students see schools as places with alien, unobtainable goals (Anderson, 1999). They view teachers as strangers from a different culture, and despair of ever attaining the required cultural capital for school success. To them, “getting an education” is equivalent to committing a kind of cultural suicide (Anderson, 1999; Eisenhardt, 2001; Ogbu, 1978).

Al faced all these challenges. He was an alienated, fifth-grade minority student who had not yet learned to read. He was labeled “learning disabled” in the areas of reading, spelling, and written language. Al came from a pocket of poverty in a mid-sized suburban community. His school attendance was sporadic, and

his behavior had become such a problem that he had received a one-year suspension for what school officials defined as threatening and dangerous behavior. Since he qualified for extensive special education services, Janice became his sole teacher for several months, after which he attended an alternative school half the day and worked with her the other half.

Although Al is a single student, a close examination of the principles that informed the minute-by-minute decisions made while teaching him reveal much about teaching alienated students in general. As Janice worked with Al, four principles emerged that were necessary for his success:

- Assessment had to be ongoing, theory based, and designed to assess Al’s personal constructs as well as skills;
- Curriculum was developed in response to the assessment, with the goal of changing Al’s personal constructs about school as well as improving his academic abilities (Allington, 1994; Primeaux, 2000);
- Before learning could occur, Al had to begin to trust himself and his teacher; and
- A key factor in developing Al’s trust involved helping him redefine concepts associated with reading and with school.

In order to reflect on Janice’s teaching practices, we have prefaced each part of her narrative with a discussion of *why* she chose those learning experiences.

## GETTING TO KNOW AL

To find out about Al, Janice turned to “kidwatching”: informed continuous assessment of students’ ability and needs (Goodman, 1985). She ob-

served Al's behaviors as he worked with her, she analyzed his talk and general conversation, and she evaluated his written artifacts, including writing and drawing. By recording and analyzing this information carefully, she began to understand Al's

that Al needed fixing: he couldn't read; he wouldn't behave; he needed to learn to do both. Teachers reported that he refused most attempts to teach him and did not appear to be motivated. Al assured me he was "too stupid" to learn and

are at the heart of their difficulties (Block, 2000; Cairney, 2000; Driscoll, 2000; Hall, et al., 1995).

## FIRST STEPS AND EXPLORING ENVIRONMENTAL PRINT

Beginnings are crucial for alienated, struggling readers. Scientists who study chaos theory have a concept called "sensitive dependence on initial conditions" which means "tiny differences in input [can] quickly become overwhelming differences in output" (Gleick, 1988, p. 8). For alienated learners, no matter how benevolent a teacher is, the "fight or flight" instincts are on heightened alert. They are distinctly aware of every nuance of a new teaching situation (Osterman, 2000). Because Al was often in trouble at school and, according to the standardized test scores and teacher reports, could only read and write a few two- and three-letter words, the first encounter was crucial. It was vitally important for Al to begin to see himself as a reader so he could try to break the cycle of the past. Janice looked to the ideas of Paulo Freire (1968) who worked with non-reading adults in ways that preserved their dignity and empowered them. Freire states that when teachers and students come from different cultures, they must first form a "cultural circle" to learn each other's ways of viewing the world. One step in this process is the recognition of what Freire calls "generative words," which are reflections of a person's worldview that can be built upon to improve literacy. Janice used Freire's ideas to begin her work with Al:

JANICE WRITES: Al felt valued by family and friends, so he and I began creating a cultural circle by exploring family names. I asked Al to tell me names of the people in his family. Since he was acquainted

**I realized that his beliefs about his learning potential and his lack of strategies were at the root of his reading problems.**

skills and personal constructs that might interfere with learning. Janice noticed that Al responded positively when working with her one-on-one away from peers. In an environment of mutual respect and acceptance, he became cooperative and motivated to learn; behavior was not a problem. Janice had these initial perspectives about Al:

JANICE WRITES: When I first met Al, he was an enigma to me. Behaviorally, he alternated between defiance and sweet gentleness. Academically, as a fifth grader, he could read only a few words and his writing skills were not much better. He had street knowledge, but he didn't know ordinary things, such as how vegetables grow or that Mexico is a country. He also had a slight physical disability that often attracted ridicule from other children. His tested intelligence was low average. In school, some people treated him as if he were mildly retarded, yet with me, he was curious and quick to learn the computer. It was difficult to get past his hard shell to see who he really was.

From Al's records, I found that before I met him, he and the school system had worked at cross purposes, each side trying hard to solve different problems (Cairney, 2000; Hynes, 2000). The school believed

could never improve. He mentioned that when he was in the regular classroom, he couldn't do the assignments and was often excused from them. Both actions confirmed for him that he was stupid and couldn't learn.

Talking with Al, I ascertained that his goal at school was to establish and maintain status with his family and his peers (Anderson, 1999). Literacy was not an important factor in his life because he believed he couldn't learn to read and write. He told me that often during literacy activities in school he acted out, which exempted him from schoolwork and raised his status in the eyes of some of his peers. Al doubted he could raise his status with adults in school, but he wanted to be valued by his classmates, partially because of the ridicule he experienced. To him, the respect of his peers was more important than academics. Once I realized this was what Al believed, I began to view his behavior problems and disabilities as barriers to learning and not as willful attempts to subvert learning. I realized that his beliefs about his learning potential and his lack of strategies were at the root of his reading problems. This is true for many struggling readers: their belief systems about learning in general and themselves as readers and writers in particular

with many people in his extended family, the list was long. He could write some of the names, and others I wrote for him. Then I made another list of names of people in my family, and we compared lists, looking for similarities, like names that began with *J* or ones that ended in *A*. We also talked about the people on the lists, telling stories about some. The names became "generative words" (Freire, 1968). They were a connection between family where Al felt safe and school where he had felt threatened.

I used these names, along with the few words he could read and words that were semantically, syntactically, and linguistically supportive, to create sentences for him to read. Each of the sentences had the same pattern. For example: "Bill is a boy;" "Fred is a boy." According to Al, these were the first full sentences he had ever read. Reading these sentences the first day was an important step in changing Al's beliefs about himself. This was apparent the next day when Al was not able to read *boy* in non-predictable text, but he was still willing to try.

The next step was to move beyond the familiar without getting into frightening territory. To do this, Al and I went on environmental print walks. We found street signs, advertisements, and words in context, like *café* and *bicycle*. We talked about the importance of signs. For example, we discussed a sign that said, "No bicycling, skateboarding, or rollerblading on the sidewalk." We talked about city government, reasons for the prohibitions, and whether or not a person who violated the ordinance would be liable if he were unable to read the sign.

Al often asked me to read words he didn't know, and he began looking for the same words in different

contexts. He noticed that words were written in different styles of print or with different morphological markers; for example, he noticed the word *roll* in a sign listing the prices of sweet rolls, then noticed the same root word in the word *rollerblading*. This began a study of word parts, pursued further after the walks were over.

From these engagements, I noticed that Al had a remarkable auditory

and then provide tailored instruction to move them forward (Gilles & Dickenson, 2000; Flint, 2000; McCallister, 2000).

To do this, I took words from Al's dictated texts and used them to generate new texts. I also encouraged him to write using these words. He was motivated to compose on the computer, and as he worked, I noticed he was adept at learning computer commands. Once

**It takes years of experiences for learners to believe they are *stupid*, so it is reasonable to expect that these feelings will not go away after a few successes.**

memory. He could repeat almost verbatim what he heard. This meant that texts could become supportive for him if they were read to him first (Watson, 1997). It also meant that language experience might be a useful strategy. In language experience, the student dictates text, usually about something that is part of his life, and the teacher acts as a scribe (Allen, 1976). Over the next few days, Al dictated several long involved stories. Because of his remarkable memory, he was able to read back almost everything he dictated, which helped him feel like a reader for the first time.

Success at these tasks helped to empower him as a learner, but he was unable to read unsupportive texts. He needed more reading strategies to become independent. Overcoming feelings of helplessness is usually a long and complicated process. It takes years of experiences for learners to believe they are *stupid*, so it is reasonable to expect that these feelings will not go away after a few successes (Howard, 1989; Hynes, 2000). To become independent, learners need teachers who recognize their needs,

I showed him how to do something, he never forgot, and his computer skills soon surpassed mine.

## COMMUNITY/DIALOGUE

Gradually, a very different boy was emerging, one who was not beligerent or defiant and was a willing reader and writer. In some ways he appeared gifted, but he still didn't have the literacy skills he needed. Al's definition of literacy was not owned, but "something they do at school." Janice knew he needed to see that literacy was a way of communicating with others, but he still wasn't able to re-enter a classroom because he couldn't control his behavior around other children. Fortunately, an opportunity arose for a learning community that didn't involve direct contact with other children. Janice continues:

JANICE WRITES: Al expressed interest in a cartoon hanging on the wall drawn by Ian, another of my students. Ian was in the fourth grade, came from a stable home, did not have behavior problems, and was a conscientious student. Al asked me about Ian and I suggested that

he write a letter. Al agreed even though he had never written or received one. The first letter he wrote said:

*Dear Ian,  
Do you like to play pool?  
I got 1 brother and 1 sister.  
My sister is 15 and my brother is 12.  
Ian, I like your picture with  
your mom and dad. My name is Al.*

Ian eagerly responded to Al's letter. Both boys wanted to make sure the words in their letters were spelled correctly, and Al became proficient at "living off the land" (Harste, Burke & Woodward, 1994): using resources in the learning environment. He remembered where he could find correct spellings of words from familiar texts. As a result, almost every word in his letters was spelled correctly in the first draft. Both boys enjoyed corresponding, and it provided texts they were eager to read.

As the boys communicated back and forth, asking and answering questions, many words were repeated. These repeated words soon became "sight words." Al decided to type a list of these "new words," and the boys' letters became a kind of shared text (Holdaway, 1979). As time went on, he read more and more of the texts independently. Ian also typed a list of his sight words, and it became a learning ritual for them to read and compare lists. Al even wrote to Ian giving him permission to use his words in his writing if he wished.

After several weeks of corresponding, I arranged for the boys to meet at my home. Al and Ian met and played pool together. They talked about things that had been in the letters. Al's behavior was appropriate the whole time. It was a vivid demonstration of the power of a small, but important community.

## REDEFINING TEXTS

In our work with struggling readers, we have seen children approach books as if they were staging an all-out war, where the words were the enemy. Yet, we've watched these same children mesmerized by a video game or television program. Popular culture is more than just alluring. Children view popular culture as separate from school. Nespor (1997) describes popular culture as providing 'bus tickets to identities' (p. 184). This is especially true for students like Al, who come from poor neighborhoods where artifacts

**In our work with  
struggling readers, we  
have seen children  
approach books as if  
they were staging an  
all-out war, where the  
words were the enemy.**

associated with pop culture images—sneakers worn by sports stars and clothing styles of recording artists—have "juice," that is, they give status to their owners (Anderson, 1999).

In addition, many struggling readers are accustomed to getting information from sources other than the written word. They reside easily in the world of video, media, and pop culture, where ideas are communicated through images and sounds, but they feel alienated in a school that relies on the written word. Janice found that media could serve as a "supportive text" just like other print texts. Showing a video prior to reading increased interest and background knowledge so that Al made informed predictions and read more fluently. Janice realized that the video could act as a scaffold to

make the text easier to read and understand for Al.

JANICE WRITES: The next text Al read was a book composed by some of my other students, based on a video about a pilot who was lost over the Pacific Ocean. After Al watched the video, we discussed what was happening in the story, especially concepts relating to geography, mathematics, science, or language usage. For example, we talked about how radio waves travel and about the geography of the South Pacific. Because he understood the video, Al was amazed that he was able to use context to read words like *frequency* and *Australia*. After he read, he decided to create a math book based on concepts from the video. Of course he wanted to share his book with Ian, and through correspondence, Ian helped Al revise his book. The next step for Al was to read commercially published material, but it had to meet several requirements: it had to be supportive, couldn't appear juvenile, had to be challenging, and had to be interesting to Al. Because of these restrictions, I chose scripts from the television show *Quantum Leap* (Bellisario, 1990) and let Al choose the episode. He chose a script about billiards that also dealt with racial prejudice. The procedure was for him to watch part of the video and then read the dialogue. Again, his auditory memory helped him read fluently.

## DEVELOPING STRATEGIES

Listening to Al read, Janice realized that he was ready to learn strategies for more independent reading. Students must be emotionally and cognitively ready because the process of developing strategies demands the most effort and trust. Struggling students who are thrown into decoding unknown words too early often either quit because they feel

overwhelmed or become dependent on decoding as their only strategy. Al was ready because he was part of a learning community, had supportive texts he could read, and was exhibiting more confidence about himself as a learner. To support his giant step from carefully supported materials to those with unfamiliar words, Janice helped Al accumulate a toolbox of efficient and effective strategies that would allow him to read unfamiliar words and maintain understanding.

JANICE WRITES: I explained that there were many strategies, but it was important to use the most efficient and effective ones. I compared the different strategies to basketball shots—basketball players have a variety of shots they can use; what matters is making the score.

One strategy I taught was word analysis. We learned to look at words like scientists, thus supplanting “reading” as the focus of this school activity. When Al miscued on a word that could not be predicted from context, I sometimes pointed out word parts. For example, we stopped and analyzed the word parts in *geometry*. We then examined other words that have the same roots.

Another strategy was to look at the context. Many times Al had problems with text because he lacked background knowledge. For example, when he encountered the word *Excaliber*, he was stuck because he didn't know about King Arthur's magical sword. When lack of background knowledge hampered his understanding, we stopped and discussed the text and looked for clues that could provide more information.

Reading this script was challenging to Al, but because of his strong auditory skills he was able to read most of it. As a follow-up, he and Ian acted out a scene and Al wrote

a letter to Scott Bakula, the lead actor in *Quantum Leap*, asking for an autographed picture. Al received a picture, and I framed it for him. He told me he kept this picture in a special place beside his bed.

## READING A NOVEL

Several months later, Al moved to alternative school half-days, even though he hadn't conquered all his reading problems. He still defined books as “scary things,” and he was unable to independently read unfamiliar text. These were hurdles he needed to conquer, so it was time for him to read a real book.

Choosing the right book was as important as choosing a particular dog to introduce to a person trying to overcome a dog phobia. Janice

**He had never read a  
book of any length  
independently, and  
he had never  
owned a book.**

knew the wrong choice could cause Al to quit. Choosing a “leveled” book would mean restricting the choice to “baby books” or ones with controlled vocabulary, either of which would confirm to Al that he was a failure.

Janice chose *Nightjohn* by Gary Paulson (1993), a story about a slave who risks life and freedom to teach other slaves to read. It was a subject that interested Al, and it is written in a dialect close to the one he spoke, which meant the book could be used to talk about dialect. Once again Janice used video to scaffold the text for Al:

JANICE WRITES: I told Al he was going to read the book and would receive

a copy of it when he finished it. The task seemed impossible. He had never read a book of any length independently, and he had never owned a book. He protested that he could not read it, but he also looked longingly at the book. I explained further that he would have help at first, but he would eventually read it all by himself. This brought disbelief back into his eyes.

The system designed to support Al involved him listening to a section of the book on audiotape, then watching the same segment on the video, and finally reading the corresponding section. Reading *Nightjohn* required using multiple strategies. As Al read aloud to me, I pointed out meaning-changing miscues. If he couldn't correct the miscues, I cued him with statements like, “Remember what this part of the story is about,” or I'd give him a semantic clue such as, “It is a color,” or “It is a name,” or “What is the opposite of \_\_\_\_\_?” Sometimes I pointed out word parts or asked him to read to the end of the sentence and then make a meaningful substitution.

If he concentrated too much on visual or sound/symbol aspects and not enough on meaning, I wrote the sentence with a blank for the unknown word. Al had to fill in the blank with a word that made sense in the sentence. Sometimes we also discussed miscues by examining the semantic, syntactic, and phonological aspects of the words. For example, Sarny, a young slave girl in *Nightjohn*, described using nicotine to kill pests on plants; Al could logically substitute *bug spray* for the word *tobacco*, but *tomorrow* was not a logical substitution.

On the rare occasions when none of these strategies worked, I told Al to omit the word. Rarely did I tell him the word. It was important for him to read the text without direct help

## When Readers Struggle

Be sure to check out the May 2001 issue of *Voices from the Middle* for further professional reading on students who struggle to read, particularly dependent readers who use ineffective strategies to get through difficult texts. The authors in this themed issue provide a range of perspectives on ways teachers can help students move to independence as readers:

- Richard Vacca explains how to make the invisible process of comprehending visible.
- Marean Jordan, Rita Jensen, and Cynthia Greenleaf describe a specific approach, Reading Apprenticeship, based on shared inquiry into the craft of literacy.
- Jeff Wilhelm argues that teachers underestimate the demands that particular texts place on readers and do not actively provide expert strategies for dealing with complex texts.
- Judith Irvin offers activities for helping dependent readers develop word knowledge.
- Renee Hobbs discusses practical ways to use popular media to improve comprehension.
- Mary Davis and Shirley Lyons focus on motivation and connecting students to texts.
- Walter Dean Myers reflects on his own childhood experiences as a reader and how his experiences influence the techniques he now uses to write books.
- The regular columnists provide additional lists of professional books, trade books, and Web sites that connect students to literacy.

—Kathy G. Short

from me, and occasionally skipping words did not adversely affect his comprehension.

Gradually, I lessened my support, relying on Al to recognize and correct miscues. The goal was for him to self-monitor. Over time, he achieved this goal. Independence was also fostered by gradually eliminating use of the audiotape. He attempted to read without listening to the tape and only went back to it if he felt the text was too difficult. About three-fourths of the way through the book, he didn't need to listen to the tape first.

Throughout this process, Al gained confidence and changed his beliefs about himself and literacy. I could tell he was aware that reading is meaning making because of the discussions we had about slavery. After reading about Nightjohn being brutally punished for teaching Sarny to read, Al asked me if I would risk my life to teach him to read if he were a slave. The question astounded me. There was no doubt that Al was having a "lived through experience" (Rosenblatt, 1994) with *Nightjohn*.

After Al finished reading the book, he said he "loved *Nightjohn*" be-

cause it was the first book he had ever read. We followed up the reading in several ways. Al wrote a letter to the author, Gary Paulsen. He said,

*Dear Gary Paulsen*

*I like your book. You wrote it great. You are a great writer. Your book is my first book to read. I hope you write another book like Nightjohn.*

*Your true friend,  
Al (last name)*

Another follow-up activity was to go to Carol's university office where Al read a section of the book to her. She told him that she recommended that book to people who wanted to become teachers, and he beamed.

In addition, when I mentioned that I had a personal friend, Tom, who was an attorney interested in slavery and reconstruction, Al asked if Tom could speak at the school. He wrote to Tom inviting him to speak to a small group of students and eagerly awaited a response. When it came, he read every word carefully. Tom agreed to come, and Al wrote back confirming the date and time. He also made a flyer informing the other students of the time and date. Al also chose a selection from *Nightjohn* to read out loud and prepared a scene from the video version for Ian and himself to act out at the presentation. When the big day came, we all gathered in our room. It was a momentous occasion: a celebration of success.

## DISCUSSION

Although Al was an unusual student in an unusual learning environment, we can learn a great deal from his experiences with Janice. In a way, he represents the many "unteachable" students encountered every day in schools: students with learning and/or cultural differences that make it hard for them to feel

part of the school community, and students who at school have been "dispossessed of their word, their expressiveness and their culture" (Freire, 1968, p. 134). This is especially true for students from minority communities like the ones Elijah Anderson (1999) chronicled in his description of the street culture of inner city Philadelphia. These students equate becoming educated with abandoning their own culture. For these students, doing well in school means "acting white" and "becoming the enemy."

Working with Al reminded us that alienated students are teachable. We learned that to be successful, these students must believe that learning

Throughout most of his education, when educators looked at Al, they saw him first as a behavior problem.

is both desirable and possible. This change doesn't begin with the students; it begins with the teachers. We had to remember that all behavior has a cause, and that beliefs influence behavior. We had to ask why Al was resistant to instruction. The answer that he gave us was that he was "stupid" and not worthy of being taught. Once we understood his beliefs and how his beliefs influenced his actions, we could change our interaction patterns with him and gradually see him in a different light.

To teach alienated students like Al, we must determine their beliefs about learning and themselves as learners. Changing beliefs does not mean that students give up their cultures or the essence of who they are. Instead, it is a matter of their

changing what Freire (1968) calls "false consciousness," so they can believe in their own efficacy. They must move from *hopelessness* to *hopefulness*. A person without hope is "divided between an identical past and present, and a future without hope. He is a person who does not perceive himself as becoming; hence he cannot have a future to be built in unity with others" (Freire, 1968, p. 174).

We found Freire's ideas vital in changing our views about Al, and in changing Al's beliefs about himself as a learner. Freire talked about the necessity for teachers and students to:

- Perceive the word differently; to "extraordinarily re-experience the ordinary" (Shor, 1980, p. 93). Al and Janice did this as they looked at family names, took literacy walks, and used videos as learning tools;
- Believe that problems are "limit solutions" instead of "blind alleys" and that these limit solutions have answers that can be found. Al solved a limit solution when he learned to use his strengths—his oral memory and his computer skills—to improve his reading weaknesses;
- Use dialogue and praxis to create a new reality in which teachers, schools, and students believe that learning is possible. Al learned to believe in himself as a reader and a writer when he corresponded with Ian, wrote books for others to read, acted out scenes from videos, and read the novel *Nightjohn*.

For us, the story of Al is an answer to Maxine Greene's (1973) question, "What do you see when you look at a child?" (p. 48). Throughout most of his education, when educators looked at Al, they saw him first as a behavior problem, a poor African American child with a learning dis-

ability who came from a dysfunctional family. If the truth be told, that is how we first viewed Al.

Over time, Al's image changed to one of an eager and able learner who was beginning to treat education and his educators with respect. To get to that point meant finding answers to two corollary questions:

1. "What did Al see when he looked at school?" The answer came through loud and clear. In a traditional school, Al was alienated. He battled each day for self-respect in the social arena. He considered the battle in the academic arena hopeless. When Al moved to a non-traditional setting, he was accepted for who he was, and he could engage and find out that sustained effort brought success.
2. "What did Al see when he looked at himself as a learner?" The answer to this question changed over time. At first, the answer for him was easy, "I'm stupid," he said. "I'm bad." Later, his opinion could be summed up in his description of *Nightjohn*: "I love *Nightjohn*. It's the first book I ever read."

Al is a case study of only one individual. Although we can't generalize our insights to all students, he taught us that beliefs are powerful. Before alienated students can overcome the restrictive situations imposed by our present educational system, educators must learn to see struggling students in a new way. Once teachers begin the re-valuing process, alienated students will start to view the school and themselves as learners differently. A positive process replaces the negative failure cycle. For alienated, struggling students, changing beliefs (ours and theirs) are even more important than new methods, materials, and reforms.

## References

- Allen, R. V. (1976). *Language experiences in communication*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Allington, R. L. (1994). What's special about special programs for children who find reading difficult. *Journal of Reading Behavior*, 26 (1), 95–115.
- Anderson, E. (1999). *Code of the street: Decency, violence and the moral life of the inner city*. New York: Norton.
- Bellisario, D. P. (1990). *Quantum leap*. Universal City, CA: Universal City Studios.
- Bemepchat, J., & Drago-Severson, E. (1999). Cross national differences in academic achievement: Beyond ecetic conceptions of children's understanding. *Review of Educational Research*, 69, 287–314.
- Block, A. A. (2000). Resisting occupation, resisting reading. *Language Arts*, 78, 129–135.
- Cairney, T. H. (2000). The construction of literacy and literacy learners. *Language Arts*, 77, 496–505.
- Driscoll, M. P. (2000). *Psychology of learning for instruction* (2nd ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Dweck, C., & Bempechet, J. (1983). Children's theories of intelligence: Consequences for learning. In S. Paris, B. Olson, & H. Stevenson (Eds.), *Learning and motivation in the classroom* (pp. 239–256). Hillstown, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Eisenhart, M. (2001). Educational ethnography past, present and future: Ideas to think with. *Educational Researcher*, 30(8), 16–27.
- Flint, A. S. (2000). Escapists, butterflies, and experts: Stance alignment in literary texts. *Language Arts*, 77, 522–531.
- Freire, P. (1968). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Seabury.
- Gilles, C., & Dickinson, J. (2000). Rejoining the literacy club: Valuing middle grade readers. *Language Arts*, 77, 512–521.
- Gleick, J. (1988). *Chaos*. New York: Viking.
- Goodman, Y. M. (1985). Kidwatching: Observing children in the classroom. In A. Jaggar & M. T. Smith-Burke (Eds.), *Observing the language learner* (pp. 9–18). Newark: International Reading Association.
- Greene, M. (1973). *Teacher as stranger: Educational philosophy for the modern age*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Hall, D. P., Prevatte, C., & Cunningham, M. (1995). Eliminating ability grouping and reducing failure in the primary grades. In R. L. Allington & S. A. Walmsley (Eds.), *No quick fix: Rethinking literacy programs in America's elementary school* (pp. 137–157). New York: Teachers College Press/International Reading Association.
- Harste, J. C., Burke, C. L., & Woodward, V. A. (1994). Children's language and world: Initial encounters with print. In R. B. Ruddell, M. R. Ruddell, & H. Singer (Eds.), *Theoretical models and processes of reading* (4th ed.), (pp. 48–69). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Holdaway, D. (1979). *The foundations of literacy*. Sydney, Australia: Ashton/Scholastic.
- Howard, D. E. (1989). Modifying negative attitudes in poor readers will generate increased reading growth and interest. *Reading Improvement*, 25(1), pp. 39–45.
- Hynes, M. (2000). I read for facts: Reading nonfiction in a fictional world. *Language Arts*, 77, 485–495.
- Kelly, G. (1963). *A theory of personality*. New York: Norton.
- Lysaker, J. (2000). Beyond words: The relational dimensions of learning to read and write. *Language Arts*, 77, 479–484.
- McCallister, C. (2000). Making history with a reader. *Language Arts*, 78, 138–147.
- Merrill, C. S. (2000). Following a child's lead toward literacy. *Language Arts*, 77, 532–537.
- Nespor, J. (1997). *Tangled up in school: Politics, space, bodies and signs in the educational process*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Ogbu, J. (1978). *Minority education and caste*. New York: Academic.
- Osterman, K. (2000). Students' need for belonging in the school community. *Review of Educational Research*, 70, 323–368.
- Paulson, G. (1993). *Nightjohn*. New York: Bantam Double-Day Dell.
- Primeaux, J. (2000). Focus on research: Shifting perspectives on struggling readers. *Language Arts*, 77, 537–542.
- Quiocho, A., & Rios, F. (2000). The power of their presence: Minority group teachers and schooling. *Review of Educational Research*, 70, 485–528.
- Rosenblatt, L. (1994). The transactional theory of reading and writing. In R. B. Ruddell, M. R. Ruddell, & H. Singer (Eds.), *Theoretical models and processes of reading* (4th ed.), (pp. 1057–1092). Newark: International Reading Association.
- Shor, I. (1980). *Critical teaching and every day life*. Boston: South End.
- Tschannen-Moran, M., & Hoy, W. (2000). A multidisciplinary analysis of the nature, meaning, and measurement of trust. *Review of Educational Research* 70, 547–593.
- Watson, D. (1997). Talking about books: Beyond decodable text/supportive and workable literature. *Language Arts* 74, 635–643.

## Author Biographies

**Janice Henson** is a special education teacher in Columbia Public Schools in Columbia, Missouri. **Carol Gilles** is assistant professor of Reading Education at the University of Missouri, Columbia.